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# Micro-foundations of small business internationalization: introduction to the Special Section

SME internationalization  
and the  
entrepreneur

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – We introduce and summarize the selected papers of the Special Section on the “Micro-Foundations of Small Business Internationalization and briefly summarize the state-of-the-art of this literature stream.

**Design/methodology/approach** – We briefly summarize the state-of-the-art of the literature regarding the micro-foundations of small business internationalization. Then, we summarize the selected papers of the Special Section, highlighting their main contributions. We end with suggesting future research avenues.

**Findings** – We move beyond the usual suspects such as gender, education and experience to bring together internationalization studies that open up the individual lens to small business internationalization. To do so, we selected papers examining deeper-level behavioural and psychological constructs impacting the internationalization process, going from internationalization intention to internationalization behaviour and eventually leading to internationalization performance.

**Originality/value** – We stress the importance of the entrepreneur as a person to better understand small business internationalization. We address the current lack of attention attributed to psychological and behavioural drivers (e.g. motives, attitudes, ambitions and aspirations) throughout the internationalization process, and we urge future researchers to further develop this research stream.

**Keywords** Small business, SME, Internationalization, Entrepreneur, Personality, Micro-foundation

**Paper type** Research paper

## The aim and scope of the Special Section

Long before the upsurge of entrepreneurship research, Edith Penrose pointed to the difficulty of including “entrepreneurship” into a general economic theory of firm growth because of its close association with the personality and temperament of the individuals involved (Penrose, 1959). In this Special Section, we put central those individuals who, so we argue, are of interest to better understand small businesses’ growth and, in particular, small businesses’ internationalization. Recent evidence suggests that small businesses show differences in growth patterns while appearing similar in terms of organizational and environmental characteristics, such as size, sector, governance and access to finance (Hamelin, 2013; Hurst and Pugsley, 2011). Such findings are at the centre of a longstanding discussion in the entrepreneurship literature (Carland *et al.*, 1984) about whether and how an entrepreneur’s individual characteristics influence firm outcomes, including internationalization (e.g. Siepel *et al.*, 2019).

The individual characteristics examined in growth studies include aspects such as gender, educational background and personality traits (Baron, 2000; Baum *et al.*, 2014; Boone *et al.*,



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1996; Brandstätter, 2011; Lee and Tsang, 2001; Wijbenga and van Witteloostuijn, 2007; Zhao *et al.*, 2010). For example, it has been demonstrated that aspects such as gender (Verheul and Van Mil, 2011), social background, education and experience (Cassar, 2006; Guzmán and Santos, 2001) have a direct impact on an entrepreneur's growth ambitions. Interestingly, a number of empirical studies dive deeper into psychological and behavioural aspects, such as an entrepreneur's attitudes, motives and ambitions and show, among other things, that growth attitudes and intentions are important predictors of subsequent firm growth (Davidsson *et al.*, 2006; Stam and Wennberg, 2009).

In this Special Section, we follow this research stream and move beyond the usual suspects such as gender, education and experience to bring together internationalization studies that open up the personal lens. In this way, we further develop the state-of-the-art on the psychological and behavioural drivers (e.g. motives, attitudes, ambitions and aspirations) of small businesses internationalization. Indeed, whereas the literature has, for example, established that growth aspirations influence expected firm growth (Cassar, 2006; Wiklund and Shepherd, 2003), the specificities and determinants of entrepreneurs' underlying psychological and behavioural aspects impacting small business internationalization are far less known. For example, it has been argued that growth-oriented entrepreneurs have higher intrinsic motivations residing within specific needs such as those for personal development (Guzmán and Santos, 2001); whether (or not?) there is a distinction between the intrinsic motivations of entrepreneurs oriented towards the domestic market only, and those seeking for international expansion, is still to be discovered. This is exactly what we explore further within the scope of this Special Section, published in volume 27, number 1 of this journal and supplemented with Haapanen (2020), also published in this journal.

Overall, the papers of our Special Section address the paucity of studies on individuals' psychological and behavioural aspects in the field of internationally growing small businesses. As such, more generally, we respond to the need for a deeper understanding of micro-foundations to explain small business international competitiveness and performance (Abell *et al.*, 2008; Coff and Kryscynski, 2011), in the tradition of what became known as behavioural strategy (Powell *et al.*, 2011). We thus explicitly put the entrepreneur (and her/his team) in the central position and try to answer the question: "What makes that some entrepreneurs (want to) explore and exploit international markets while others do not, apart from their businesses' organizational features and perceived business opportunities abroad?"

### **Current state-of-the-art of the micro-foundations of small business internationalization**

The study domain of small business internationalization – also called International Entrepreneurship (IE) – is incredibly large with many different themes and subthemes (Jones *et al.*, 2011). Rightfully, the three levels of analysis (the entrepreneur, the firm and the environment) are recurring cornerstones in IE studies (e.g. Keupp and Gassmann, 2009; Mejri and Umemoto, 2010), with more and more studies stressing the importance of a contingency view where two or more levels of analysis are studied in an integrative manner (Kiss *et al.*, 2012; De Clerq *et al.*, 2012). Although such more complex models (e.g. Child and Hsieh, 2014; Handrito *et al.*, 2020) are, without doubt, very useful to further advance research in the field of IE, the constructs taken into account in IE studies at the level of the entrepreneur tend to neglect deeper-level psychological and behavioural aspects (Handrito *et al.*, 2020).

That is unfortunate, in particular because earlier personality studies do portray national differences. Jung *et al.* (2001) and Thomas and Mueller (2000), for example, portray country differences when probing into concepts such as entrepreneurial self-efficacy, internal locus of control and risk-taking propensity. They find that perceptions of entrepreneurial self-efficacy are lower in collectivistic nations than in individualistic ones (Jung *et al.*, 2001) and argue that in countries culturally distant from the United States, an entrepreneur's internal locus of

control and risk-taking propensity are lower (Thomas and Mueller, 2000). Given that entrepreneurial self-efficacy is positively related to entrepreneurial intentions and actions in a highly individualistic country (Jung *et al.*, 2001), it seems that entrepreneurial activities such as firm internationalization thrive more in some countries than in others. Whether this is indeed the case, however, is yet to be discovered.

When probing deeper into studies focusing on the relationship between individual aspects and internationalization, it is apparent that the first studies in this domain only started to emerge around the mid-2000s (Jones *et al.*, 2011). This is much later than general entrepreneurship research, including that with a behavioural flavour, Schumpeter (1912/1988) already advocating at the beginning of the twentieth century for a central place of the entrepreneur in economic development studies. Overall, we can roughly subdivide small business internationalization studies into the chronology of the internationalization process, starting from pre-internationalization and internationalization intention to internationalization behaviour and ending up with research on internationalization performance (see, e.g. Jones and Coviello (2005) who adopt a similar process view). In what follows, we briefly summarize the state-of-the-art of these three phases.

In relation to the *pre-internationalization phase*, Casillas and Acedo (2013) show in a review study that education abroad (e.g. Bloodgood *et al.*, 1996; Reuber and Fisher, 1997) or a global vision (e.g. Oviatt and McDougall, 1994) are determinants of internationalization speed, and Zuchella *et al.* (2007) explain that prior international experience nurtured in family firms drives early firm internationalization. Jones and Coviello (2005) pinpoint that aspects such as the entrepreneur's tolerance for ambiguity or flexibility, need for achievement, risk perception or risk tolerance all influence internationalization intention. In an extensive review study on IE, Keupp and Gassmann (2009) show that 25% of the studies in the domain focus on the impact of socio-cognitive or demographic properties of owners/managers on the propensity to internationalize. Even though this seems relatively high, the attention attributed to individual aspects is surprisingly low in specific sub-domains of IE, and studies on deeper-level psychological and behavioural aspects are clearly underrepresented.

More specifically, there is a clear lack of studies focusing on the impact of the entrepreneur's characteristics as an antecedent of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) entry mode [1]. Bruneel and De Cock (2016), for example, show in their systematic literature review on an SMEs entry mode that although 81% of the studies focus on antecedents, almost all attention goes to environmental uncertainty and asset specificity. They only found one study that focused on the individual level; Pinho (2007) showed that the entrepreneur's ability to innovate and its international experience are positively associated with an equity-based entry mode. This lack of attention to the individual level does not only contradict general small business and entrepreneurship literature (Shepherd, 2011) but also ignores SME internationalization research (Oviatt and McDougall, 2005) where it is argued that the manager/owner is in the centre of the entrepreneurial decision-making process (Bruneel and De Cock, 2016; Peschken *et al.*, 2016).

The second remark about research on the pre-internationalization phase relates to the lack of research on deeper-level psychological and behavioural aspects. Although the extant body of knowledge does recognize the importance of individual aspects such as the entrepreneur's proactiveness and risk or opportunity perceptions (e.g. Acedo and Galán, 2011), deeper-level constructs such as the entrepreneur's motivational system are under-researched in relation to the intention to internationalize. This is unfortunate, in particular because studies such as those El Shoubaki *et al.* (2020) and Hermans *et al.* (2017) reveal that to advance our understanding of company goals and growth, studies need to integrate insights on entrepreneurial motives. A sole focus on human capital dimensions is insufficient (El Shoubaki *et al.*, 2020). In the IE domain, Handrito *et al.* (2020) reveal that an entrepreneur's implicit need for achievement is associated with an SME's internationalization performance.

Given that motivational dispositions and specifically deep-rooted implicit needs energize individuals and predict stable, long-term behaviour (Schultheiss and Brunstein, 2010; Slabbinck *et al.*, 2018), it goes without saying that studies about such deeper-level psychological and behavioural constructs in relation to internationalization intention are badly needed.

In sum, even though the body of knowledge on the pre-internationalization phase shows that individual aspects such as risk perception (e.g. Acedo and Jones, 2007; Shrader *et al.*, 2000), higher education levels (e.g. Amorós *et al.*, 2016) or international experience (Child and Hsieh, 2014) impact the decision to internationalize and its timing, the specificities on the impact of such individual aspects in specific sub-domains are under-researched (e.g. Bruneel and De Cock, 2016) and the number of studies on deeper-level psychological and behavioural aspects is still surprisingly low (Acedo and Florin, 2006; Geh, 2010; Peschken *et al.*, 2016).

When we turn our attention to *actual internationalization behaviour*, it is apparent that a large number of studies in the IE domain focus on patterns and processes of internationalization (Jones *et al.*, 2011). Within this group of studies, however, only a few acknowledge the importance of individual-level aspects. Indeed, although a large number of IE studies examine if and how the entrepreneur's demographic and socio-cognitive characteristics favour early internationalization (Keupp and Gassmann, 2009), the interlinkages between such individual elements and actual firm internationalization behaviour are under-researched.

One notable exception is Child *et al.* (2017), who examine three distinct international business models and show that the decision-maker's international experience predicts the adopted international business model. For example, they find that decision-makers with previous international business experience tend to adopt an ambidextrous explorer business model, which is a "business model [that] combines exploration and exploitation, though with a much greater investment in exploration than the other models" (Child *et al.*, 2017, p. 670). Another exception is Rialp *et al.* (2005), who stress the importance of a firm's internationalization capabilities. They define internationalization capabilities as "an unobservable or "invisible" strategic asset mostly characterized by scarce home-based path dependencies but high levels of tacitness and causal ambiguity in its accumulation process" (p. 161), and reveal that the entrepreneur's human capital drives such capabilities.

When we relate these insights into Meiri and Umemoto's (2010) knowledge-based model of SME internationalization, in which experiential knowledge is put central throughout the internationalization process, one can argue that the development of experiential knowledge – which is an individual-level constructs comprising network, cultural and entrepreneurial knowledge – starts in the pre-internationalization phase and is further strengthened during the subsequent internationalization process (Meiri and Umemoto, 2010). Again, in this viewpoint, individual aspects such as personal experiential knowledge are thus prevalent throughout the entire internationalization process.

The usefulness of a knowledge-based approach is also implicitly embedded in Perks and Hughes' (2008) study, who argue that it is rather the entrepreneurs' connections to customers, and their tacit knowledge, vision and product-service complexity that define whether or not the entrepreneur decides to internationalize. Indeed, by extending these insights into Meiri and Umemoto's (2010) knowledge-based internationalization model, we argue that Perks and Hughes' (2008) strategy-related aspects are *underpinned* by experiential knowledge development throughout the entire internationalization process: Thanks to experiential knowledge development, the entrepreneur is able to further develop, e.g. its connections to customers and product-service complexity throughout the entire internationalization process.

Finally, when turning our attention to *internationalization performance* studies, it turns out that a large number of IE studies examine the association between organizational issues and internationalization performance (Jones *et al.*, 2011). This is much less the case for studies

acknowledging a direct association between individual-level aspects and internationalization performance. Notable exceptions are [Ruzzier \*et al.\* \(2007\)](#) and [Handrito \*et al.\* \(2020\)](#), who show that the entrepreneur's risk perception and international orientation influence the firm's degree of internationalization ([Ruzzier \*et al.\*, 2007](#)), and unravel the relationship between the entrepreneur's implicit need for achievement, risk perception and internationalization performance ([Handrito \*et al.\*, 2020](#)). More specifically, the latter show that the highest level of internationalization performance is achieved by entrepreneurs scoring high on implicit need for achievement and who perceive risks as very high.

In sum, these results suggest that although individual-level aspects such as the manager's global vision ([Johnson, 2004](#)) or international experience and knowledge ([Terjesen and Elam, 2009](#)) are often taken into account in relation to internationalization decisions ([Terjesen \*et al.\*, 2016](#)), direct associations with internationalization performance are examined to a much lesser extent. This does not seem to be justified, in particular not in relation to deeper-level psychological constructs which define, as discussed above, long-term behaviours and outcomes ([Schultheiss and Brunstein, 2010](#)), such as internationalization performance ([Handrito \*et al.\*, 2020](#)).

### The Special Section contents

The articles in the Special Section advance our knowledge on the individual drivers of the internationalization process of small businesses. We purposefully selected papers that take account of behavioural and psychological constructs such as motives, attitudes, ambitions or aspirations to advance our lack of knowledge in this domain. [Table 1](#) provides an overview of the Special Section's contributions.

The *first* paper by [Bowen \(2020\)](#) examines the motives of SME internationalization in a comparative study of Wales and Brittany. The study allows us to gain a comprehensive understanding of the barriers that either favour or prevent firms to internationalize, and more specifically how variables at different levels (i.e. individual, firm and environment) interact to influence the motives to internationalize. Specifically, the fact that the author positions the underlying motives to internationalize as being proactive or reactive ([Czinkota and Ronkainen, 2006](#); [Hollensen, 2014](#)) of already internationalizing entrepreneurs, and that he argues that an entrepreneur's attitude to internationalization can be active or passive depending on underlying personal, firm and environmental variables, is of interest for this Special Section. All in all, the paper can be positioned as a pre-internationalization study.

Although not explicitly referred to, the author relies on contingency theory to argue that different levels of analysis jointly influence an entrepreneur's motives and attitudes to internationalize. He adopts a mixed methods approach and focuses on a single industry (food and drinks) in two specific regions (Wales and Brittany) to minimize environmental variation. This allows him to not only probe into the web of underlying factors towards (non-) internationalization but also to explicitly take into account cultural and environmental differences between these regions. He first distributed an online questionnaire to capture factors impacting the firm's internationalization status (i.e. exporting or not exporting). In a second phase, he conducted 37 semi-structured interviews to further probe into the questionnaire findings. To do so, he separately analysed the data of the two earlier mentioned groups: Exporting and non-exporting SMEs. The choice of separating the sample firms according to their internationalization status (exporting versus non-exporting firms) in the qualitative study allows the author to explore whether motives and attitudes to internationalization vary in function of the internationalization status of the firm. In addition, the assumed symmetry between the perceived drivers and inhibitors of firms in a pre-internationalization phase, and of those that already (cautiously) started to



Table 1.  
Contributions to the  
special section

Title and author(s)	Focus	Research question	Theory applied	Method	Data	Main contribution
Motives to SME Internationalization: A comparative study of export propensity among food and drink SMEs in Wales and Brittany  Author: R. Bowen	Pre-internationalization: Exporting or not	How do entrepreneurial, firm and environmental characteristics influence the attitudes towards and motives to internationalize	Contingency Theory (although not explicitly positioned as such)	Mixed-method: Empirical-quantitative (logistic regressions) and Empirical-qualitative (in-depth interviews)	- Questionnaire to 169 food and drink producing SMEs in Wales and Brittany - Semi-structured follow-up interviews with 37 food and drink producing SMEs in Wales and Brittany	- Stresses that exporters' motives and attitudes to internationalize and those of non-exporters are <i>not</i> symmetrical - Acknowledges that to understand the underlying motives and attitudes to internationalization, insights into a complex web of entrepreneurial, firm and environmental antecedents is needed
The role of reciprocity in the internationalization of social enterprises  Authors: Evans, K.M.; Ermilina, V., and Salaiz, A.	Internationalization behaviour (conceptual)	How does internationalization occur within social enterprises, what is the role of reciprocity?	Social Exchange Theory (Gouldner, 1960)	Conceptual	Conceptual, supported by two illustrative cases	- Conceptualization of a firm's social mission as a valuable intangible asset that can enhance performance outcomes (i.e. internationalization), through reciprocity
Are international small business owners really that different?  Authors: Gundlach, S. and Sammartino, A.	Pre-internationalization: Internationalizing or not	Do female small business owners have different personality traits than their decision-making employee counterparts, and do they assess their capabilities differently?	No specific theory, but the ideas originate from Female Entrepreneurship	Empirical-quantitative (independent samples <i>t</i> -tests)	Questionnaire to 186 female entrepreneurs (business owners) and 137 female decision-making employees	- For female entrepreneurs, no statistical difference between internationalizing and non-internationalizing business owners on the typical "male" individual (continued)

Title and author(s)	Focus	Research question	Theory applied	Method	Data	Main contribution
		Are there any differences in relation to the propensity to internationalize and the perceived barriers to internationalization?				traits and attributes could be found. This seems to suggest that for this entrepreneur segment, other individual constructs lie at the basis of the decision to internationalize. - For female entrepreneurs, perceived political and financial barriers, but also personal barriers seem to lie at the basis of the decision to internationalize.
When strategic consensus matters: Dynamic managerial capabilities and firm internationalization as seen by TMT  Authors: Haapanen, L.; Hurmelinna-Laukkanen, P., and Puumalainen, K.	- Internationalization behaviour: Deliberate country expansion (strategy) (yes/no) - Internationalization performance: Foreign customers (yes/no); recurring foreign customers (yes/no); long-term international customers (yes/no)	How do dynamic managerial capabilities and TMT strategic consensus jointly influence firm internationalization?	- Dynamic managerial capabilities (Augier and Teece, 2009) - Upper echelon theory (Hambrick and Mason, 1984)	Empirical-quantitative (Qualitative Comparative Analysis)	Questionnaire to 261 TMT members in 61 firms	- Explaining firm-level internationalization by bringing together manager- and team-level characteristics in a configurational approach



internationalize, is questioned. Overall, this mixed-method approach allows the author to obtain a holistic view of the underlying factors of SME internationalization.

When probing into the findings of the paper, it is apparent that Bowen's quantitative results point to a mixture of proactive and reactive motives for internationalization. Proactive motives turn out to be, amongst others, an international growth strategy and growth opportunity awareness, whereas reactive motives are underpinned by being risk averse. Moreover, the results unravel differences in both motives and the conditions to internationalize across the two cultural contexts studied: Wales and Brittany. These findings are further investigated in the qualitative phase of the study. Here, he explicitly subdivides the data coming from internationalizing and non-internationalizing firms. He observes that already internationalized firms subdivide the motives to internationalize into three motivation themes: Reactive, proactive or mixed. Interestingly, for non-exporters, Bowen distinguished three underlying attitudes towards internationalization: (1) No desire for internationalization, (2) passive towards internationalization and (3) an active desire for internationalization that failed. Regarding the regional differences (Wales versus Brittany), he observed that environmental conditions are perceived as more favourable in Brittany, where less barriers to internationalize were listed. Here, the desire to internationalize also turned out to be greater.

Overall, the findings of this paper explicitly show that the three levels of analysis (entrepreneurial, firm and environmental) play a significant role in shaping the motives for and attitudes to internationalization. Specifically, it turned out that environmental conditions lay the foundations for many firm attitudes to internationalization. Moreover, the results underline that although firms of all examined characteristics have the ability to internationalize, internationalization is more likely to occur when the firm adopts a more proactive attitude towards internationalization. Finally, the results also underline that the local culture/ecosystem is an important driver of internationalization. It echoes, in a novel manner, the stylized fact of observed differences in small business internationalization across Europe.

The *second* paper, written by *Evans et al. (2020)*, scrutinizes the role of reciprocity in the internationalization of social enterprises. According to the authors, the question of how internationalization occurs within social enterprises (SEs) has been overlooked in small business and entrepreneurship studies, while this question is particularly salient because many SEs address global problems. Social enterprises generally seek to simultaneously address two goals: The achievement of a socially desirable outcome, combined with financial self-sufficiency (*Sharir and Lerner, 2006; Battilana and Lee, 2014*). They do so as non-profit, for-profit or hybrid forms of organization (*Mair and Marti, 2006*). Until today, internationalization successes in SEs have been ascribed to the characteristics and networks of the owners, as well as the transposability of various resources, including financial, logistic and operational resources (*Hutchinson et al., 2006*).

In their quest for the micro-foundations of small firm internationalization, the authors rely on social exchange theory (SET) in order to explain the role of reciprocity as a key component within the internationalization process of SEs. As one of the central pillars in SET, reciprocity refers to the mutually beneficial exchange between partners (*Gouldner, 1960*). Recognizing the numerous transactional relationships in social life, SET has found reciprocity to be a crucial component of mutual exchange and commitments, also in organizational studies (*Cropanzano and Mitchell, 2005; Gouldner, 1960*). Relying on SET and reciprocity, Evans and her colleagues theorize that the internationalization process of small businesses with a social purpose could be distinct from that of other enterprises, because reciprocity leads to faster rates of embeddedness and knowledge exchange with local stakeholders.

As such, the article suggests that the theoretical framework of the Uppsala internationalization model (*Johanson and Vahlne, 1977*) may be less applicable to SEs.

Rooted in the behavioural theory of the firm (Cyert and March, 1963; Penrose, 1959), the Uppsala model has been the result of an empirical study of how Swedish manufacturers entered foreign markets, revealing the sequential steps in the process. It has become a prominent conceptual tool for the interpretation of internationalization processes, which, since its inception in 1977, has been regularly revisited by accounting for new perspectives and research results (e.g. Johanson and Vahlne, 2009; Vahlne and Johanson, 2013, 2017). As a dynamic theory of the internationalization process, the Uppsala model regards internationalization as a result of an incremental learning process: Enterprises expand incrementally from one psychic close market to the next one, and, by learning and building up market knowledge and resources, they cope with the risks and uncertainties commonly associated with the expansion into foreign markets (Johansen and Vahlne, 1977).

Evans and her colleagues derive from the Uppsala model the proposition that the lack of knowledge about foreign markets makes up the largest hurdle in firms' incremental internationalization processes, and they argue that social enterprises are able to bypass the obstacles and incrementalism traditionally ascribed to internationalization by means of reciprocity. Based on their theorizing, the authors suggest that social enterprises may be capable of internationalizing more swiftly compared with organizations lacking the social purpose, and they elicit how the social mission can be a driver of the internationalization process (cf. Kalinic and Pater, 2013). Hence, so they argue, the social orientation of a SE is an "essential tool for establishing effective connections with local stakeholders via positive reciprocal exchanges" (p. 77), which they illustrate with two examples (one is the Jibu clean water project in Africa; the other one the Educate Girls project in Rajasthan, India): When SEs enter a foreign market, a social exchange process is set in motion. Bringing a good or service with social properties into a new market installs a process of reciprocity, which originates in an affective commitment and increased levels of trust (e.g. Bishop and Scott, 2000) between the SE and local stakeholders. Evans and her colleagues argue that such reciprocal relationships will lead to a local embedding of the SE that exceeds the pace with which any other enterprise would succeed in doing so. Once embedded in the local social structure, SEs will not only benefit from economies of time but also from a greater likelihood of knowledge exchange (Uzzi, 1997), as well as higher levels of commitment and cooperative behaviour. In contrast to internationalizing enterprises that are not involved in reciprocal relationships, so Evans and her colleagues argue, SEs will be less affected by information deficiencies because of the established trust.

The variance of a SEs internationalization success is then dependent on the extent to which this process of reciprocity is effectuated within a local social community with its specific values and norms. The authors develop a number of propositions based on Hofstede's (1991) dimensions of national culture. Firstly, in collectivist countries (cf. Hofstede, 1991), the accelerated rate of embeddedness through reciprocity will be greater than in individualist countries. Also, secondly, a country's level of femininity (compared with masculinity, cf. Hofstede, 1991) affects the rate of SE internationalization, with feminine cultures more prone to relational values thus reciprocity. Thirdly, cultures with weak uncertainty avoidance are more comfortable with the unknown (Hofstede, 1991), and thus likely to be less suspicious to the value propositions of SEs.

Taken together, while social missions are the very reason why SEs internationalize, Evans and her colleagues conceptualize of an organization's social orientation as a valuable intangible asset that can ease the process of internationalization through reciprocity. Such a take on small firm internationalization is important, not only because it is essential to understand the behaviour of SEs, which are no longer a marginal phenomenon, but also because other enterprises could benefit from establishing reciprocal relationships in foreign markets in order to overcome the barriers commonly associated with a lack of information or trust.

The *third* paper of [Gundlach and Sammartino \(2020\)](#) probes into individual differences within one specific entrepreneurial segment: Women entrepreneurs, a group whose social and economic importance cannot be overestimated ([Holmquist and Carter, 2009](#)). The authors compare the individual traits and attributes of women entrepreneurs with those of their female decision-making counterparts in larger organizations. As such, they pinpoint the specificities of businesswomen, and challenge the idea that the “the ideal entrepreneur is typically represented as “a risk-taking innovator who proactively exploits international growth opportunities’ ([Welch et al., 2008](#), p. 116, p. 116)”, cited in [Gundlach and Sammartino](#) (p. 93). Gundlach and Sammartino explain that the critics of this definition argue that its inherently masculinist orientation does not do justice to female characteristics of entrepreneurship. For this, studies probing into differences of female entrepreneurs compared to female employees are necessary. Gundlach and Sammartino follow this argument and stress that a focus on women allows us to understand deeper-level differences within one gender type, as opposed to further reinforcing male dominance in the field of entrepreneurship.

To do so, the authors set out a survey among Australian businesswomen. They gathered data on 186 female entrepreneurs (business owners) and 137 decision-making employees. Of the female entrepreneurs, 130 were already internationally active, as compared to 112 of the female decision-making employees. They employed independent samples *t*-tests to compare small business owners with decision-making employees, and internationalizing with non-internationalizing businesswomen on personality traits, perceived self-efficacy and perceived barriers to internationalize.

The authors find that proactiveness is higher among small business owners, but that – contrary to the expectations – decision-making employees score higher on tolerance for ambiguity and management self-efficacy. Interestingly, tolerance for ambiguity turned out to be significantly higher for businesswomen who were already engaged in international activities, compared to those who were only focusing on the domestic market. This difference did not hold for business owners, where no statistical difference between internationalizing and non-internationalizing business owners on individual traits and attributes could be found. Finally, Gundlach and Sammartino portrayed that decision-making employees perceive resource barriers to internationalize as significantly lower than small business owners. In addition, they found significant and consistent differences of five types of internationalization barriers between internationalizing and non-internationalizing businesswomen: Perceived knowledge, resource, procedure, exogenous and personal barriers. These differences remained stable (albeit not always significant) for the sub-groups of small business owners and employees only.

When probing deeper in their findings, it is apparent that there are no statistical differences on personality traits and attributes between internationalizing and non-internationalizing female business owners. This seems to suggest that for female business owners, other explanations need to be discovered with regard to the decision to internationalize. Perceived barriers to internationalize seem to be a good candidate to do so. Such barriers turned out to be significantly lower for small business owners already internationally active compared to small business owners not yet internationally active. This seems to suggest that once female small business owners are internationally active, they are more flexible to travel internationally and have more confidence in pursuing international business opportunities.

Taking all results together, Gundlach and Sammartino propose that the choice to internationalize a small business is dependent upon the owner’s perceptions about the firm’s available resources, knowledge and networks. Specifically related to individual-level constructs, they propose that the owner’s perception about personal self-efficacy in the internationalization domain defines the decision whether or not to internationalize. This

seems to suggest that although firm and environmental variables cannot be neglected in the decision to internationalize, that individual constructs such as personal self-efficacy should be taken into account as well in a study on small business internationalization.

Finally, in the *fourth* paper, [Haapanen et al. \(2020\)](#) acknowledge that similar levels of internationalization can be achieved through different pathways. In their contribution to the Special Section, the authors empirically investigate how attributes at both the manager's level (dynamic capabilities) and the team level (consensus) jointly yet differently impact internationalization, by means of a configurational (QCA) approach ([Ragin, 2014](#)). The management and international business literatures have articulated the importance of a manager's knowledge, skills and motivation as drivers of international expansion (e.g. [Dimitratos et al., 2011](#)), as well as the international experience of a firm's top management team (TMT) ([Hutzschenreuter and Horstkotte, 2013](#)). Equally, the literature states that some level of consensus within the team is needed to achieve such strategic expansion goals ([Teece, 2007](#)). Haapanen and his colleagues bring together those insights in their study of the relationship between dynamic managerial capabilities and the strategic consensus within the TMT in connection to those capabilities, on the one hand, and different stages of the internationalization process, on the other hand.

In line with the upper echelon perspective ([Hambrick and Mason, 1984](#); [Boone et al., 2004](#)), the authors recognize that within-team heterogeneity may lead to positive outcomes, including various capabilities, but that it could also hamper the development of strategic consensus and the implementation of a firm's strategies. They posit that "TMT strategic consensus occurs when executives share their perception of the firm's current competitive standing, and based on this common understanding, are capable of making strategic decisions" ([Bragaw and Misangyi, 2019](#)). As the literature remains scant with regard to how strategic consensus over different aspects of dynamic managerial capabilities regulates internationalization, Haapanen and his colleagues take up a set-theoretic method ([Ragin, 2014](#)) to study those mechanisms. In line with [Augier and Teece \(2009\)](#), the authors disaggregate dynamic managerial capabilities into sensing opportunities and threats, seizing opportunities and reconfiguring capabilities in order to reveal the configurations of varying dimensions of those managerial capabilities and a TMT's strategic consensus in relation to a firm's internationalization process.

In line with, for example, [Woldesenbet et al. \(2012\)](#), the findings based on survey data collected from 261 TMT members within 61 firms underline that dynamic managerial capabilities are important for firm internationalization. In contrast, they also suggest that neither those capabilities nor TMT diversity or strategic consensus in isolation are able to explain internationalization. Interesting is that a lack of TMT consensus seems to prevent firms from international stagnation when it comes with the presence of dynamic managerial capabilities; only in combination with low reconfiguration capabilities (or when a firm is incapable of changing its approach), not being able to agree on strategies at the team level is likely to generate negative results.

The contribution of the article by Haapanen and his colleagues mainly resides in bringing together manager- and team-level characteristics in order to explain firm-level internationalization, doing so through a QCA configurational bundle lens, and in revealing how nuanced the internationalization process can be, by disentangling managerial capabilities and TMT composition into a number of components and bringing them into configurations that do work, or that do not.

### Future research directions

Based on our own literature review and the contributions of the papers linked to this Special Section, six future research avenues emerge, at least. First, we started this Special Section with a little state-of-the-art review of the micro-foundations of small business

internationalization literature, and urged future researchers to further attribute attention to deeper-level behavioural and psychological constructs throughout the internationalization process (e.g. [Handrito et al., 2020](#)). One way of doing so is by comparing different cultural and institutional settings. Comparative cross-context studies do not only allow us to dive deeper into the individual differences of internationally growing entrepreneurs but also to better understand whether and how cultural and institutional contexts impact such differences (e.g. [Leung and Bond, 1989](#); [Chudzikowski et al., 2011](#)). The comparative cross-context approach thus contributes to the clarification of how and to what extent entrepreneurs' growth aspirations, ambitions and motives interact with their willingness and openness to expand in and adjust to different regional or national contexts (e.g. [Busenitz and Lau, 1996](#); [Liñán and Chen, 2009](#)).

Bowen and Gundlach and Sammartino both extend this idea and show that not only research in different contexts but also studies on different groups of entrepreneurs shed light on the micro-foundations of small business internationalization. Bowen focused on examining the motives and attitudes to internationalization across internationalizing and non-internationalizing firms. As such, he challenged the idea that the internationalization of a firm is a naturally occurring phenomenon. Instead, he proposes that internationalization is, at least partially, determined by the entrepreneur's preferences, albeit combined with firm characteristics and environmental conditions. Gundlach and Sammartino focused on female entrepreneurs. Interestingly, they did not find statistical differences between internationalizing and non-internationalizing female business owners on typical "male" individual traits and attributes, such as proactiveness. This seems to suggest that for this entrepreneurial segment, other individual constructs lie at the basis of the decision to internationalize. Such reasoning is in line with [Phan and Wright \(2018\)](#), who underline "that cognition and behaviour are at the core of management research. Research at the individual, organization, and system levels of analysis ultimately starts from theories of why and how individuals make decisions to compete or cooperate to achieve their goals" (p. 179).

Second, whereas individual-level constructs, without any doubt, contribute to underpinning the decision to internationalize and the subsequent internationalization process, studies on all three levels of analysis (i.e. the entrepreneur, the firm and the environment) are still needed. Gundlach and Sammartino corroborate this, in particular because they found differences regarding the perceived barriers to internationalize between internationalizing and non-internationalizing female business owners. Haapanen and his colleagues go one step further and show that the dynamic capabilities at the manager level, strategic consensus at the team level and the performance at the firm level should be brought together into configurational sets because in isolation they fail to explain firm performance (i.e. internationalization). We urge future researchers to do so and to not only acknowledge the importance of the individual, the firm and the environment, but also of the team, in so doing contributing to the development of comprehensive and complex models to understand the underlying psychological and behavioural aspects of small businesses internationalization.

Third, next to studying the antecedents and behaviours of such configurations (in relation to their international activities) more in depth, the interactions between TMT consensus and managerial capabilities could be scrutinized in future research as well: The findings of Haapanen and his colleagues already seem to suggest that dynamic managerial capabilities may lead to international development when there is no consensus within the team. Because this would call for statistical analyses, in-depth data collection on team processes in interaction with management would certainly benefit the quality of future research. Since researchers rarely have the opportunity to observe how TMTs develop strategic decisions and consensus, there is a clear lack of insights on the dynamics of this process, particularly during international expansion. We therefore call for future studies adopting a longitudinal approach.

Fourth, in line with this, Bowen's results echo the observation that growth motivation influences actual firm growth (Baum *et al.*, 1998, 2001; Cassar, 2007; Kolvereid and Bullvag, 1996; Miner *et al.*, 1989), and that growth motivation is, at least partially, determined by the entrepreneur's preferences, personal goals or expected consequences of growth (Bird, 1988; Carland *et al.*, 1984; Cooper, 1993; Davidsson, 1991; Dutta and Thonhill, 2008; Herron and Robinson, 1993; Kolvereid, 2002; Wiklund *et al.*, 2003). We urge future researchers to further unravel such specificities for internationalization, and elicit how the entrepreneur's preferences and / or personal goals influence internationalization motives and attitudes, and subsequent performance. Combining this with insights at the firm and environmental level of analysis would further bridge the three levels of analysis influencing firm growth (Felin *et al.*, 2015), as suggested in contingency theory and adopted in IE research (see, e.g. Keupp and Gassmann, 2009).

Fifth, future researchers could investigate the propositions made by Evans and her colleagues, and study how reciprocity can benefit social enterprises in the internationalization process, as well as to what extent reciprocity leads to internationalization successes, among other characteristics of the firm, the entrepreneur and the context in which SE internationalization takes place. Reciprocity, similar to trust, is a core organizing principle, and reciprocated contacts might enable or constrain entrepreneurship and internationalization (Janjuha-Jivraj and Spence, 2009; Kim and Aldrich, 2005). While reciprocity as a sociocultural dynamic in entrepreneurship has regularly been studied in family and ethnic group contexts, bringing it into the SE domain and taking into account its various manifestations (Verver and Koning, 2018), is therefore a fertile avenue to go.

Sixth and finally, a final future research avenue based on Evans *et al.*'s conceptual reasoning is that the relationship between (international) entrepreneurship and reciprocity is far from understood – in all types of ventures, not only SEs. This is strange, as entrepreneurs are permanently facing exchange and decision processes in interaction with clients and investors; whether and how the willingness to return favours (or harm, for that matter) affects the entrepreneurial process and firm internationalization is well worth studying (cf. Cable and Shane, 1997). In this regard, micro-foundations such as reciprocity tendencies, either as a personality trait or a form of social cognition, could benefit from adequate measurement instruments suited for the (international) entrepreneurship context, possibly inspired by work in economic psychology and experimental social psychology (e.g. Berkowitz, 1968; Caliendo *et al.*, 2012).

## Note

1. In this paper, please note that we employ the terms SME and small business interchangeably.

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